The Democratic Dilemma

Religion, Reform, and the Social Order in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791–1850

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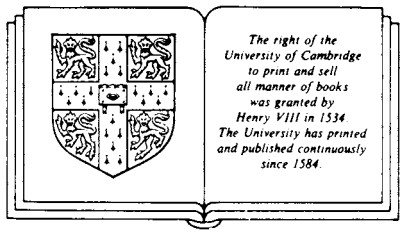

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Introduction

The Age of Democratic Revolution, which spanned the period between the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763 and the middle of the nineteenth century, altered forever the terms upon which governments governed and the ways in which religious institutions shaped the morals and spiritual beliefs of the societies that surrounded them. Established churches and unrepresentative governments, whose vitality and legitimacy had already been undermined in many nations for a generation or more, suddenly confronted ideals and social conditions that they were ill-prepared to meet. Belief in equality, democracy, and religious dissent spread, at times lessening the willingness of whole peoples to accept established authority. Population pressure and economic change altered social arrangements and expectations that had provided the foundation for old religious and political institutions.

These changes in belief and society produced a dramatic transformation of religion, morality, and politics on the revolutionary frontier of the United States, especially on the northern edge of that frontier, which extended some 600 miles from the upper Connecticut River Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire to the Western Reserve of Ohio on the southern shore of Lake Erie. This region was settled primarily by New Englanders in the years immediately before and after the American Revolution. Here a society arose that was truly the child of the revolutionary age: a society that was formally committed to the ideals of democracy, equality, and religious freedom and that rejected slavery, monarchy, established churches, and imperial domination. Its members aspired to economic independence and self-employment and dedicated themselves with extraordinary fervor to making it the most perfect society on earth.

This society fell short of fulfilling much of its original promise, however. Despite its formidable achievements, it never became the tolerant, egalitarian society that many thought would arise as a result of popular government and voluntary religion, and by the 1830s and 1840s it could no longer give many of its inhabitants what they wanted most – independent shops and farms for themselves and their descendants. Still, it

was less deeply divided, more prosperous and stable, and more firmly committed to democracy, equality, and tolerance than the societies of Europe and most other regions of the United States. It was also markedly more successful in creating churches that received the enthusiastic, voluntary support of a high proportion of the citizenry and in erecting republican governments that could be reformed and that were willing to play leading roles in the effort to reform society.

The new relationship that arose on the frontier between church and government and the citizenry was both a cause and a consequence of the region's most distinctive trait in that era: the frequency with which its inhabitants organized and joined religious and reform movements. They embraced, and in some instances invented, most of the eccentric "isms" of the period (Mormonism, Adventism, perfectionism, millennialism, communitarianism) and they furthered mainstream movements (revivalism, sabbatarianism, abolitionism, Antimasonry, temperance, benevolence) with unparalleled zeal. Indeed, by the mid-1830s the inhabitants had been so far "consumed" by the flames of religious passion and moral fervor that these areas of the frontier were dubbed "burned-over districts." By that time, the region had achieved the highest levels of active church membership and of enrollment in reform societies in the world. Its citizens led the national crusade to make the United States the first truly Christian, reformed republic, one that conformed to God's laws and embodied transcendent moral values.[1]

That is not to say that the people of the northern revolutionary frontier stood alone in their commitment to religious and reform movements. They were part of a wider Anglo-American community that supported religious revivals and reform movements throughout the period in many regions of the United States and Great Britain. The Celtic Fringe of Great Britain, which comprised Wales, Cornwall, and Scotland, was especially burned-over by religious revivals and vied closely with the northern frontier of the United States for leadership in church membership and religious enthusiasm.[2]

The fact that many movements rose and fell simultaneously in the burned-over districts and in the Anglo-American community at large testifies to the close ties and communications among religious enthusiasts and reformers in the English-speaking world and suggests that many movements arose not simply from the peculiar conditions that prevailed on the revolutionary frontier, but from conditions that prevailed throughout the Western world during the Age of Democratic Revolution. Nevertheless, that frontier provided the most fertile ground for these movements: better, for instance, than southern New England or the areas of the revolutionary frontier to the immediate south that were settled by

New Yorkers, Germans, Scotch-Irish, and Dutch, and far better than most of the British Isles and the Continent.

Why did the reserved, industrious inhabitants of northern New England, upstate New York, and northeastern Ohio embark upon the most tumultuous religious and reform crusades of the revolutionary age? The interpreters of America's republican tradition, following Tocqueville, point to the tension between republican ideals and liberal reality in the young nation and argue that Christians and reformers acted as they did because they were afraid that their neighbors were becoming a "liberal" people – individualistic, pluralistic, capitalistic, and partisan – and were not living up to the republican ideals of the Founding Fathers. Those ideals entailed not only the establishment of a republican form of government that vested power in representatives elected by the people and that guaranteed the rights and property of all citizens. They presumed a commitment to the public good before private interests. Some historians contend that Christians and reformers were responding to the specter of corrupt materialism looming over the burned-over districts, breeding tyranny and faction. They saw their unifying communitarian traditions succumbing to the influence of the Revolution and fierce economic competition on the frontier and worked feverishly to constrain those of their fellow countrymen who were ill-disciplined, selfish, and impious.[3]

There is an ambiguity in the republican–liberal interpretation of the history of the burned-over districts that has led advocates of this interpretation to mistake the source of the tension that lay at the center of society in the early republic. That ambiguity stems from a failure to determine what is meant by "liberalism." Liberalism is at once the inevitable product of an irresistible force like the market revolution or human nature, the undesirable fruit of ideals and social changes unleashed by the Revolution, and the tragic consequence of republicanism's problematic effort to reconcile the public good with the private pursuit of happiness.[4] The concept has been used to describe a wide range of changes in values, habits, and institutions in the burned-over districts. Among them are the rise of individualism, evident in a growing emphasis on the rights and freedoms of individuals, as well as in an increase in self-interestedness, isolation, self-expression, and assertiveness; the growth of pluralism, a heightened anxiety among members of particular religious, economic, and social groups to defend their peculiar values and interests, and a corresponding fragmentation of society into conflicting groups; the development of capitalism, attended by an increased attachment to material values, and a deepening involvement in an impersonal market economy dominated by entrepreneurs and financiers who increasingly controlled exchange and production; and the rise of political partisanship,

of personal commitment to sustained political activity and of formal political parties that represented the increasingly disparate interests of individuals and social groups.[5]

Historians of the burned-over districts assert that liberalism fostered a privatism that carried the districts and their inhabitants away from the republican ideals of community, cooperation, and equilibrium. Yet it is clear that, on New England's revolutionary frontier, each assertion of individual rights resulted eventually in new claims on individuals, claims that most citizens met willingly. Almost every fragmentation of the society into conflicting groups ended in reunification around new shared values and interests. Despite changes in the structure of the economy, especially in manufacturing centers and in regional markets, the vast majority of the inhabitants remained committed over the entire period to the same goals and strategies, to securing prosperous shops or farms for themselves and their children, and to ensuring that virtue prospered and rough equality prevailed. Control over production and exchange was still widely diffused, and people continued to exchange capital, goods, and services primarily with friends and relatives in protected town and neighborhood markets. Each period of intense political mobilization and conflict, including that which pitted Whigs against Democrats, ended in political reunification and a decline in political participation and party identification.[6]

The emphasis of the republican–liberal interpretation on the tension between ideals and reality also obscures the complexity of republican aspirations themselves. Recent works on revolutionary America demonstrate that republican ideology meant various things to various people.[7] As Donald Smith has shown in his study of revolutionary Vermont, the differences among adherents of the balanced, classical republic of George Washington and John Adams, and people who supported the evangelical republic of the Calvinist clergy, or the radical republic of Thomas Paine, were so pronounced that these factions actually rioted against each other during Vermont's struggle for independence from New York.[8] Each faction propelled society in a potentially liberal direction by advancing regard for individual rights, economic opportunity, personal freedom, and popular government. Some proponents of individualism or capitalism believed that they could unleash the young nation's creative and productive energies by relaxing community restraints. Some advocates of pluralism or partisanship believed that they could prevent any one faction from dominating society by encouraging antagonistic groups to compete for power.

Such people remained a tiny minority, however. Few revolutionary frontiersmen wanted to create a liberal society, and virtually all would

have been frustrated had such a society arisen. By embracing republican ideology, the vast majority of people in the burned-over districts committed themselves formally to values that could promote liberalism, but they also committed themselves to other, contrary values, which favored the restraint of liberties for the good of community, and encouraged a sense of mutual obligation among citizens.

These differences among people who espoused republican ideology make it clear why every conscious effort to fashion society after a particular republican vision failed, and why most settlers on New England's frontier were frustrated by the society that emerged after the Revolution. They also indicate that most people on the frontier were firmly set against the liberalization of their society. The social order that they struggled so persistently to create was liberal neither in theory nor in fact.[9]

The mystery behind the widespread participation of New England's revolutionary frontiersmen in moral and spiritual crusades is thus more easily resolved if the central tension in early republican life is located not between republican ideals and liberal reality, but among the diverse and contrary aspirations of revolutionary Americans.[10] Those who settled the burned-over districts embraced the idea of democratic revolution more thoroughly than anyone else in the Western world. Frustrated in their efforts to protect their values and interests by limited economic opportunities, religious controversy, and political strife, most revolutionary frontiersmen blamed their problems on the ecclesiastical and aristocratic establishments of southern New England and Great Britain and vested their trust in a social order whose institutions rested on the principles of consent of the governed and of equality of citizens before the law. They were inspired by what R. R. Palmer terms a "democratic" vision, founded on dissatisfaction with existing social inequities and on an insistence that neither political nor religious power resides in any privileged or closed body of men.[11]

Their revolution was thus a recoiling from old evils as much as a venture toward a specific social order, and it is clear that not all the inhabitants of the burned-over districts wished to press the democratic revolution to its fullest extent. After all, for many people the word "democracy" still had negative connotations. What made the burned-over districts remarkable, however, was that few people shrank from the revolution's radical faith in the equality of mankind. All but a handful of these pioneers dedicated themselves as revolutionaries to bringing toleration, freedom, economic opportunity, and popular government to the frontier and the world. They embedded those ideals in their institutions and their society. Yet in so doing they eliminated almost every instrument they could use to secure their most cherished ideals and interests: economic indepen-

dence and security, moral and spiritual unity, and political harmony. Together those ideals embodied the New England way of life, which was what they wished most to protect and to share with the world. New England's revolutionary frontiersmen faced a dilemma from which they could not escape: how to reconcile their commitment to competition, toleration, and popular sovereignty with their desire to defend an orderly and pious way of life.

The people of the burned-over districts shared that dilemma with democrats throughout their own nation and the Western world. Yet they experienced it with peculiar intensity, for they were at once the world's most radical democrats and the latest conservators of New England's communitarian traditions. They were on the whole a devout people, and an ambitious one, and they refused to relinquish their desire to create a society that would allow them to save what they valued in their way of life and still enable them to realize dreams long frustrated in America and Europe. That refusal to compromise one aspiration for the sake of another led them to invest their democratic enterprise with singular energy. It was what attracted them to republican ideology, which promised to enable them to realize all their aspirations.[12]

To resolve their dilemma these New Englanders tried to create a Christian, reformed republic. Their goal remained elusive, however. They found that the ideas and social changes brought into being by the Revolution compounded their difficulties and rendered calculated remedies useless. The problem was not that they had become a liberal people. The problem was that they remained, despite social and intellectual change, a people who were democratic by conviction and predicament, but whose aspirations and society were jeopardized by diversity, by partisanship, and by a simultaneous commitment to equality of condition and equality of opportunity. Because almost every event or change that occurred after 1775 seemed to threaten their way of life, they considered themselves in a perpetual state of crisis.

They were delivered by the burst of religious and reform activity that swept the region in the years following the War of 1812. Those crusades were abetted by contemporaneous campaigns for economic and community development that encouraged citizens of different neighborhoods and diverse interests to work together to improve their communities. Through these movements the people of the burned-over districts created the institutions, habits, and ideas that enabled them to cope with the problems of denominational and political strife, ungovernable townspeople and church members, and diminished opportunities for youths – problems that generated an apparent increase in irreligious and immoral behavior. Through these movements, New England's frontiersmen

worked to create a new kind of society: not a liberal society whose worst tendencies were checked or controlled by Christians and reformers, but a society that embodied the principles of Christianity and reform.

Those who shaped the postrevolutionary society through the spiritual, moral, and economic campaigns that pervaded the burned-over districts were not always able to understand or articulate that society's workings or their contributions to it, particularly because their new social order succeeded as often by obscuring and begging the dilemmas at the heart of democracy as it did by addressing and resolving them. The methods Christians and reformers devised for controlling youths, diverting discontent into safe political channels, and helping their children succeed economically relied to no small degree on informal coercion, manipulation, and discrimination, even though Christians and reformers committed themselves formally to an open society that eschewed such behavior. They drew creatively on a multiplicity of theological and political traditions to transcend the contradictions between their methods and their democratic values. Yet few of these New Englanders sympathized with the self-conscious builders of new orders in their midst, like Joseph Smith or John Humphrey Noyes; and they themselves had their clearest successes when they were least self-conscious in their efforts to refashion their society.

The Connecticut River Valley of Vermont is an ideal place to study the postrevolutionary order these New Englanders created. There the dilemmas of democratic life presented themselves in their starkest form. Because the valley's settlement began in the 1760s, at the onset of the revolutionary era, its early inhabitants had firsthand knowledge of prerevolutionary southern New England and carried most of its traditions, controversies, and ideals with them to the frontier. Ties of kinship, commerce, and geography linked them to the inhabitants of Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire. Yet the valley's settlers also experienced the full force of the democratic revolution, on a frontier contested not only by Great Britain, but by New York and New Hampshire, states vying to impose their own laws and institutions on the valley. By striking out for independence from all three powers, the valley's settlers fought a revolution that was in some ways broader in its aims than the American Revolution. Theirs was a fight against tenancy, unrepresentative government, and religious establishments. It was a fight to determine the character of their way of life and to free themselves from the need to compromise on that score with southern New Englanders and Yorkers.

The Connecticut River Valley itself comprises roughly the eastern half of Vermont, stretching from the Connecticut River in the east to the Green Mountains in the west and the Granite Hills in the north. With

Map 1. Area of study, Vermont

Towns in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont

Addison County
1. Granville
2. Hancock

Bennington County
1. Landgrove
2. Peru
3. Readsboro
4. Searsburg
5. Winhall

Caledonia County
1. Barnet
2. Burke
3. Danville
4. Groton
5. Hardwick
6. Kirby
7. Lyndon
8. Newark
9. Peacham
10. Ryegate
11. St. Johnsbury
12. Sheffield
13. Sutton
14. Walden
15. Waterford
16. Wheelock

Essex County
0. Not settled
1. Bloomfield
2. Brighton
3. Brunswick
4. Canaan
5. Concord
6. Granby
7. Guildhall
8. Lemington
9. Lunenburg
10. Maidstone
11. Victory

Orange County
1. Bradford
2. Braintree
3. Brookfield
4. Chelsea
5. Corinth
6. Fairlee
7. Newbury
8. Orange
9. Randolph
10. Strafford
11. Thetford
12. Topsham
13. Tunbridge
14. Vershire
15. Washington
16. West Fairlee
17. Williamstown

Rutland County
1. Pittsfield
2. Sherburne

Washington County
1. Barre
2. Berlin
3. Cabot
4. Calais
5. Duxbury
6. Fayston
7. Marshfield
8. Middlesex
9. Montpelier
10. Moretown
11. Northfield
12. Plainfield
13. Roxbury
14. Waitsfield
15. Warren
16. Waterbury
17. Woodbury
18. Worcester

Windham County
1. Athens
2. Brattleboro
3. Brookline
4. Dover
5. Dummerston
6. Grafton
7. Guilford
8. Halifax
9. Jamaica
10. Londonderry
11. Marlboro
12. Newfane
13. Putney
14. Rockingham
15. Somerset
16. Stratton
17. Townshend
18. Vernon
19. Wardsboro
20. Westminster
21. Whitingham
22. Wilmington
23. Windham

Windsor County
1. Andover
2. Barnard
3. Bethel
4. Bridgewater
5. Cavendish
6. Chester
7. Hartford
8. Hartland
9. Ludlow
10. Norwich
11. Pomfret
12. Plymouth
13. Reading
14. Rochester
15. Royalton
16. Sharon
17. Springfield
18. Stockbridge
19. Weathersfield
20. Weston
21. West Windsor
22. Windsor
23. Woodstock

Washington County, part of which lies in the Lake Champlain watershed, it includes six full counties and parts of three more (Map 1). Its inhabitants clearly thought of themselves as a unique people, and of the valley as an important and distinctive region. Whether they lived in a marketing or manufacturing center, an agricultural community, or a backwoods hill settlement, they referred to themselves as "valley" residents. Many of them pointed to the differences between themselves and western Vermonters, whom they considered "wild," and western New Hampshire residents, whose courage and revolutionary fervor they doubted.

The inhabitants of the nine towns whose history is examined here in depth (Map 1) were a varied lot. Some came from hill towns (Peacham or Pomfret), some from prosperous farming communities (Weathersfield, West Windsor, Barnet, Ryegate, or St. Johnsbury), and some from large commercial centers (Windsor or Woodstock). Many of Weathersfield's early settlers were antievangelical Calvinists, or Old Lights, and a number of them opposed both the American Revolution and Vermont's revolution against New York and were less hostile to southern New England's Calvinist establishments and the Federalist Party than other Vermonters. The settlers of the other communities in Windsor County – Windsor, West Windsor, Pomfret, and Woodstock – included a disproportionate number of zealous Calvinist evangelicals, or New Lights, who gave Vermont's revolution and the early Republican Party their wholehearted support. The settlers of the four towns in Caledonia County, most of whom arrived after the Revolution, were more heterogeneous in their political and spiritual convictions. Among their number were the Presbyterian dissenters from Scotland and northern Ireland who settled in Barnet and Ryegate. Unique in their customs and religious beliefs, they were the only large body of immigrants not native to New England to settle in the valley.

The histories of these nine towns were otherwise largely representative. Their populations grew rapidly during the 1790s and early 1800s, and more slowly thereafter, until growth stopped in most valley towns in the 1840s. Caledonia County towns continued to grow in the 1840s, particularly St. Johnsbury, which became a major manufacturing center, and Barnet and Ryegate, where Scots inheritance practices helped young people to continue to establish themselves at home. Windsor County towns grew smaller, however, as the population of these older communities aged and as young people moved away in search of opportunity (Table 1). Along with the rest of the valley, these nine towns moved to Antimasonry in the early 1830s and to Whiggery by the 1840s (Table 2). They shared in the increase in the number of meetinghouses and churches, particularly non-Calvinist churches (Table 3), and issued a steady stream

Table 1. Population of the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont and of Selected Towns, 1790-1850

	1790	1810	1830	1850
Selected Caledonia County towns				
Barnet	477	1,301	1,764	2,521
Peacham	365	1,301	1,351	1,377
Ryegate	187	812	1,119	1,606
St. Johnsbury	143	1,334	1,592	2,758
Selected Windsor County towns				
Pomfret	710	1,473	1,867	1,546
Weathersfield	1,146	2,115	2,213	1,851
West Windsor/Windsor	1,542	2,757	3,134	2,930
Woodstock	1,605	2,672	3,044	3,041
Connecticut River Valley of Vermont				
	44,664	108,701	142,984	147,774

of petitions. These towns also left the most complete records in the valley (Appendix A) and thus provide an opportunity to examine in detail the causes and consequences of the valley's extraordinary moral, spiritual, and political movements and the ways in which family, church, community, and class relationships changed as the valley's postrevolutionary order took shape.

Western New Hampshire, southern New England, and other burned-over districts can furnish some evidence that illuminates the valley's peculiarities, particularly the evangelical and revolutionary fervor of its earliest inhabitants, and the extraordinary strength of its later commitment to Antimasonry and antislavery. To show that Vermonters faced a problem of democratic order that was but one manifestation of a more general problem faced by people throughout the Western world, and that Vermonters' commitment to religious and reform movements was rooted as much in that general problem as in the peculiar problems of democratic life, evidence must come from farther afield. That is why Wales and Württemberg, two other predominantly rural, Protestant areas with strong pietistic traditions, are examined briefly in the conclusion to this study. Those two regions provide evidence that churches and reform societies gained strength not only where the democratic revolution

Table 2. Party Vote in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont and in Selected Towns, 1806-1844

	Median percentage Republican, 1806-17	Median percentage Antimasonic, 1830-34	Median percentage Whig, 1836-44
Selected Caledonia County towns			
Barnet	24	74	59
Peacham	10	66	58
Ryegate	51	77	47
St. Johnsbury	34	77	62
Selected Windsor County towns			
Pomfret	92	55	65
Weathersfield	38	49	82
West Windsor/Windsor	63	49	74
Woodstock	82	54	80
Connecticut River Valley of Vermont			
	53	46	54

triumphed, but wherever revolutionary ideas and social changes disrupted town life and politics. This was particularly true in Great Britain and America, where townspeople and middle-class elites found themselves bereft of effective formal means of securing their values and interests, and most especially true in Vermont, where frontier life and two revolutions (one against government by Great Britain, the other against government by New York) made it difficult to reconstruct laws, institutions, and traditions.

Among the burned-over districts of the revolutionary frontier, the state of Vermont has a strong claim to preeminence. It would become, in fact as well as in fiction, the symbolic fount of the young nation's truculent egalitarianism, militant faith, and crusading idealism. It was home in the antebellum period to unsurpassed religious revivals and temperance crusades and to the strongest antislavery, Antimasonic, and free-soil sentiment in the nation. It was the birthplace of an army of moral and spiritual leaders who attained greatness elsewhere, from Thaddeus Stevens, the fire-eating radical Republican, to Joseph Smith and Brigham Young, the fathers of Mormonism. Vermont's Green Mountain Boys became in

Table 3. Churches and Union Meetinghouses in the Connecticut River Valley of Vermont, 1791-1843[a]

	1791	1800	1815	1828	1843
Selected towns in Caledonia and Windsor counties					
Calvinist churches	6	9	14	14	18
Non-Calvinist churches	1	2	5	11	15
Union meetinghouses	0	0	0	0	3
Connecticut River Valley of Vermont					
Calvinist churches	35	83	134	170	177
Non-Calvinist churches	1	26	52	114	173
Union meetinghouses	0	1	4	19	40
Number of inhabitants per church or Union meetinghouse	1,241	724	615	460	374

[a] The data include only churches and interdenominational meetinghouses supported by voluntary contributions. The data do not include town meetinghouses that were supported by taxes. See Appendix A for the sources of the data.

American historical mythology the archetypal revolutionary frontiersmen, defying the land-jobbers and patroons of colonial New York. They surprised the British at Fort Ticonderoga and wrote a constitution in 1777 that outlawed slavery and enfranchised every male who paid his poll tax. Vermont's women supplied authors like Harriet Beecher Stowe, Henry James, and Owen Wister with models for the forthright Yankee women who populated their novels, eager to carry their moral and spiritual influence to benighted places like the West, the South, and Europe.

Of course, such facts and fictions tell only part of the story. Every moral and spiritual crusade inspired strong opposition, and Vermont was as renowned for its satirical wits, profane pranksters, and rough-and-ready woodsmen as for its statesmen, Christians, and reformers. It was the birthplace not only of crusaders, but of wheeler-dealer pragmatists like Stephen Douglas, the popular-sovereignty Democrat, who would turn his back on Vermont when its self-righteous refusal to compromise helped ruin his plan to beg the moral question of slavery. Despite Vermont's enshrinement of Ethan Allen as a freedom fighter, the vast majority of his contemporaries feared him as a freethinker and a leveler and did their utmost to prevent the rise of the open, progressive society he envisioned. And although Vermont's women were generally esteemed as

educators, missionaries, and inspirational poets who could enlighten the darkest corners of the globe, they were often frustrated at home and struggled for years to gain a modicum of influence and standing beyond the confines of their homes and churches.

Not all Vermonters wanted to shape Vermont after the visions of church members and reformers, and church members and reformers themselves had no unified idea of the social order they hoped to create. Vermonters contested their society's future hotly, above all because they could not agree upon a common response to the central dilemma of democratic life: how to reconcile their desire for security, moral and spiritual unity, and political harmony with their revolutionary commitment to competition, toleration, and democracy. But through conflict, through diverse religious and moral efforts to address this dilemma, Vermont's postrevolutionary order gradually took shape. That order would rest on Christian and reform principles and center on churches and reform organizations. It was not wholly faithful to the visions of Vermont's founders, nor ever wholly popular or secure, but it did bring unity and stability to town life and politics. It also encouraged Vermonters, as creators of what they thought was the most Christian and democratic society on earth, to believe that they had been chosen to be the custodians of America's (and indeed the world's) moral, spiritual, and political heritage and to take it upon themselves to see that that heritage never became a thing of the past.